

# **Teacher's Guide**

for the  
**AlphaSmart® Pro Keyboard**

- **Writing Activities Across the Curriculum**
- **Student Handout**
- **Tips and Tricks**

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## ■ INTRODUCTION

The AlphaSmart® Pro keyboard is a unique and valuable tool for improving your students' thinking and writing skills. This Teacher's Guide for the AlphaSmart Pro contains ideas for student projects, writing activities, and a "master copy" for a student handout.

**Note:** It's assumed that both you and your students understand the AlphaSmart Pro's basic operation, including how to switch between files, how to upload files to your word processor, and what the special keys do (like HOME and CLEAR).

### **More Than You Bargained For**

The AlphaSmart Pro is exceptionally well suited for helping students improve the quantity and quality of their "prewriting"—the raw material that will be refined at later stages in the composing process (more about this, below). Making notes, false starts, and early drafts (all part of prewriting) doesn't apply just to assignments done for English classes. They are the starting points for thinking, problem-solving, and writing *across* the curriculum.

One of the major goals of prewriting activities is to build fluency. Attention to format and correctness are appropriate to later stages in the composing process.

With this in mind, the activities, tips, and tricks provided in this Teacher's Guide are meant to accomplish two related goals.

First, they provide activities that students might use for different kinds of assignments in a variety of classes or subject matter areas—any setting in which the AlphaSmart Pro can support teaching and learning.

Second, many of the suggestions are designed to help you and your students break the Technology 80/20 Rule: Eighty percent of the people who use a given piece of

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hardware or software make use of only 20% of its power.

As simple as it is to use, the AlphaSmart Pro keyboard has features that are just *waiting* to be exploited in creative ways, to add even more value to its use. You don't have to use it for long before you begin to see how you've gotten even more than you bargained for.

### Anything Worth Writing...

...is worth writing poorly. At first. That's what "pre-writing" is all about. Prewriting is a way for students to *begin* to give shape and order to their thoughts. The AlphaSmart Pro is great for helping them mine diamonds in the rough. The polishing and setting come later.

Often, students spend too much time in early stages of the composing process tinkering with their text, when the working rule should be "Don't get it 'right'— get it *down*." (This is advice once given to writers for *The New Yorker*.) The necessary revising and editing can come later, when the students are sure that they're working on material that deserves and demands their attention.

After all, prewriting is just a stage in a *process* that also includes preparing more complete drafts, letting others comment on the writing, re-thinking and revising, editing and proofreading, and "publishing" the writing, i.e., making it public in some formal way (perhaps in a class anthology or even just by "handing it in").

The strategies that follow are particularly good for generating copious notes as well as useful and substantive "mental doodles." The activities also help dissolve writing blocks, which often result from students' trying to do their *rewriting* before they've done their *prewriting*, from struggling to say *exactly* what they mean before they're even sure what's on their minds.

**Note:** Students may need to practice the *habits of mind* inherent in many of these activities as well as the specific

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methods. Encourage the class to talk over what worked, what didn't, and why. Encourage students to try a technique again after getting advice from you and from their classmates about how to do a given activity a little better the next time. Not everything will work perfectly for every student every time it's tried; students will find that practice is as important here as anywhere else.

### **The Composing Product**

We want students to produce clear and effective writing that demonstrates a command of grammar, spelling, and punctuation. We want them to be fluent and to be able to write in a variety of "voices" and styles to suit the occasion. We also want them to value writing as a means for giving structure and order to what they know and want to say.

The AlphaSmart Pro keyboard can be an invaluable aid for reaching all of these goals. It can be particularly helpful as your students engage in the early stages of the composing process, as they prepare to produce a product of which you can all be proud.

### **Your Notes:**

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## ■ WRITING ACTIVITIES

### Sequential Writing

This activity promotes attention to coherence and creativity.

Working in small groups, students start their own essays, poems, descriptions, explanations, or stories, either with their own ideas or with a common prompt (e.g., “Alone, the last person alive on earth, he was startled to hear a knock on the door”).

Students type 1-4 lines, then pass their keyboards to a neighbor, who adds 1-4 lines. Students keep passing the keyboards from person to person around the group until they wind up with the keyboards they started with. The pieces get read aloud, discussed, edited, printed, and published in a collection.

### Sequential Responding

This activity develops students’ skills as analytical readers and responders. It also teaches them ways to help build and develop other peoples’ work instead of just “tearing it apart.”

Students bring to class a printout of a piece of work-in-progress. The student’s name should be included at the top of the page.

Display on the board (or in a handout) a set of response categories like the following (F1 is kept available for the author’s comments about the other students’ responses):

**F2:** What you wrote...

**F3:** The way you approached the assignment...

**F4:** Something you might have mentioned is...

**F5:** One thing you mentioned that I hadn’t considered before was...

F6: I was surprised...

F7: You're good at...

Have students trade keyboards and pick a file into which to put a response to the work-in-progress. The first student to work in a particular file should type the words as shown above (modified for grade level, etc.) and then add his or her personal comment—along with the responder's name. Students trade keyboards after contributing to an assigned number of files. All comments should include the name of the person making the comment.

The author eventually gets the keyboard back and can review the comments and use them to help shape future versions of the writing. The author can use F1 to write his or her own responses to questions like these:

- What kinds of comments were most helpful?
- What kinds of comments were least helpful?
- If you only had time to take three bits of advice to improve your writing, what advice would you use?

## Looping

This activity develops fluency and the ability to focus on a topic.

For 3-5 minutes students do a quantity of "freewriting" in file F1 on a topic appropriate to the class; that is, they try to get down a lot of thoughts without worrying about typing mistakes, spelling, complete sentences, changes of topic, etc. They then review their work, deciding on one particular idea, sentence, phrase, or word that captures some interesting point.

They use this text to begin another short freewriting period in file F2. They then review F2 and use the text there as the basis for repeating the procedure in F3. And so on for



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F4, F5, etc. Each new file begins with a short piece of text from the previous file. All the files eventually get printed and reviewed as raw material for further writing.

This procedure could also be adapted to the Sequential Writing activity described above. The difference between “sequence” writing and “looping” is that in the former, the new file picks up where the previous file left off and continues in the general direction of the previous file. In looping, the new file takes as a starting point any portion of the previous file that catches the writer’s interest.

### **Group Looping**

This activity builds fluency, the ability to focus, and the kind of creativity and collaborative involvement typical of “writing in the real world.”

Students work in small groups, with one AlphaSmart Pro per student. They each start a file in F1 as described above in the Looping activity.

After 3-5 minutes, students pass their keyboards to a neighbor, who reviews the F1 file, deciding on one particular idea, sentence, phrase, or word that captures some interesting point. Students use this text to do another short period of freewriting in file F2. Students should put their names at the end of their contributions. When finished, they hand the AlphaSmart Pro to a third group member, who reviews F2 and repeats the procedure, doing a short freewriting period in F3. And so on for F4, F5, etc., with each new file beginning with a short piece of text from the previous file.

Eventually (depending on the size of the groups or how much time you can devote to this procedure), the keyboard is returned to the original author, who can review the files to get perspectives, ideas, and quotes for future use in preparing a piece of writing.

## Invisible Writing

Students report that this approach develops fluency and helps them overcome the tendency to do inappropriate rewriting before appropriate time is spent prewriting. They also report that they're more interested in seeing what they have to say. The procedure described below is one way to practice the technique before it's applied to actual writing assignments.

Students use a large Post-It sticker to cover up the text window. They spend 1-3 minutes freewriting on the given topic (see explanation of freewriting in the "Looping" section, above). They then remove the sticker, review the text, and spend 1-3 minutes freewriting "visibly" (i.e., they can see the text), continuing to respond to the assignment. They repeat this two-part procedure.

Finally, students spend 2-4 minutes freewriting on how the two different conditions affected their thinking and writing. They discuss this in class. They print the material for later use.

Here are some sample topics to help students practice this technique. They're designed to provide tasks of equal "cognitive load." Students start with the writing prompt and continue with their own words. With slight modifications, similar prompts can be generated for a variety of topics and curriculum areas.

- "I'm typing on this keyboard, and..." // "I can't see what I'm typing and..."
- Why do people read poetry? // Why do people write poetry?
- Why do people read history books? // Why do people write history books?
- What's hard about learning chemistry? // What's easy about learning chemistry?

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- What was hard about being in school last year? // What was easy about being in school last year?
  - What's mysterious about math? // What's as easy as pie about math?

## ■ THE TIPS & TRICKS PAGE

Depending on the age and expertise of your students, you can photocopy the Tips & Tricks page (located in the center of this manual) to use as a handout, or you can just provide the ideas to them yourself as you see fit.

**Your Notes:**

## ■ TIPS AND TRICKS

Here are a few ways to help make your use of the AlphaSmart keyboard more organized, efficient, productive, and enjoyable.

### **All in a Name.**

At the start of a file, use the CAPS LOCK key to type a name or topic for the file. This will help you quickly identify its contents as you later move from file to file.

### **No Place Like Home**

At the end of a work session, tap the HOME key before you leave the file. Since files open at the last cursor position, the next time you open this file it will be at the beginning, and you'll know immediately what the file is about—since you've followed the advice, above, about naming your file.

### **Pair a Graphic**

To save space in a file, don't double-space or indent between paragraphs. Instead, use two easily visible characters to indicate the start of new paragraphs (e.g., // or ## or %%). You can delete these characters and replace them with paragraph breaks after

you've transferred your text to your computer's word processor.

### **Tape of the Tape**

When doing interviews, taking field notes, or keeping a learning-log, put a strip of lift-off white tape or some stickers above the file keys (F1, F2, etc.). Label the keys with a set of thinking categories to help keep track of things, for example:

- Who? What? When? Where? Why?
- What? So What? Now What?
- +'s (positives) -'s (negatives)  
!'s (interesting factors, neither positive nor negative).

Colored stickers or small pictures may be helpful if you prefer to use nonverbal means to jog your memory.

### **Leave the Blanks Blank (For Now)**

When jotting down notes and first impressions, if you can't think of a word, just type in a dotted line. Trust yourself. You'll think of it later.

## ■ EVEN MORE WRITING ACTIVITIES

### Double-Entry Journals

This activity teaches the distinction between *taking* notes and *making* notes, between recording thoughts and using writing to generate insights. The fancy term for this is “metacognition,” i.e., thinking about thinking. The plain sense of it all is that it helps students practice doing the right thing at the right time.

Students use F1 to take notes on an assignment, an interview, etc., but they number each separate idea, entry, or item. They use F2 as the second half of a “double-entry journal,” in which they comment or reflect upon the notes they’ve taken, with their reflections keyed to the numbers in F1. (Additional files can, of course, be used to continue the work begun in F2.)

Students can print both files and use the material to provide quotes and insights on the topic they’re writing about.

### Home/End

This activity provides an opportunity to apply creativity across the curriculum.

Have students type in a sentence that is likely to prompt some thought (e.g., “He checked his schedule to see what he planned to ruin today.”). They then tap the RETURN key once or twice.

Now they type in another sentence that would seem to finish things off (e.g., “They left him wondering whether the door would close in time.”). They move the cursor between the two sentences and type the material that connects them. They can use the HOME and END keys to keep track of where they began and where they’re headed.

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Here are some other beginnings and endings:

- Alone, the last person left alive on earth, he was startled by a knock on the door. / / Slowly the stars faded into the comforting sky.
- A math major, she decided that “asymptote” was the best metaphor for her friends’ relationship. / / They had, she decided, taught her a lot about being a “first derivative.”
- Henry Ford said that “history is bunk” because... / / And—the group was reminded by Professor Henry Mellon Owle—Henry Ford is history.

### **Class Act**

To help students prepare for class discussions, have them use the questions below to begin thinking about a reading assignment you’ve given. They can keep the list of questions in one of their available files and use another file to jot down their responses, which should be elaborated rather than just terse replies. They can toggle back and forth between the files, keying their responses to the questions.

1. Type a title to that identifies the assigned reading (make up your own if it doesn’t already have one).
2. What, if anything, does the author seem to know about writing that you don’t already know yourself? (Not about the subject matter, but about *writing*.)
3. What’s something you know that could have been included in the piece but wasn’t?
4. What’s something that was included in the piece that you already knew?

5. What's a word, phrase, or sentence that surprised, bothered, amused, or confused you? Explain why it affected you that way.
6. Without using any part of the title, what are five key words that would tell someone what this piece of writing was about? After you've listed the words, explain why you picked each one.
7. Imagine that this piece of writing were to continue. Write the *first* three lines of the new section. (If it helps, imagine that its current last line or paragraph were the first line or paragraph of the next portion. Write the three lines that would follow *those* lines.)

### **Window Dressing**

Here's something to help students get adept at using special keys and at placing text where they want it. The activity also provides an opportunity to be clever and creative.

Have students work individually or in small groups to design a "window display" for the AlphaSmart Pro's text window. They can use special characters to create a "graphics" effect—with or without accompanying text. See what they can come up with to fill a single "window," i.e., the whole picture should be visible without doing any scrolling.

Here are some Design Categories: Billboards, Borders, Holiday Symbols, Faces, Bumper Stickers, Belt Buckles, Product Logos, Visual Jokes.



## Two Examples

### 1. (An Optical Illusion)

Notice that as you stare at the image in the box at the right, the image will seem to disappear!



### 2. (A Fancy Border)

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@ @ @ @ @ *** @ @ @ @ @ *** @ @ @ @ @ *** @ @ @ @ @ *** @ @ @ @ @  
@                                                                 @  
@                                                                 @  
@ @ @ @ @ *** @ @ @ @ @ *** @ @ @ @ @ *** @ @ @ @ @ *** @ @ @ @ @
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## Just for Fun—With a Purpose

Here's a way to generate a rich store of discussion material related to students' attitudes toward computers and writing.

Have half the group write a letter to their AlphaSmart Pro —using the keyboard to compose the letter. They can start off with the words, “Dear AlphaSmart Pro ...” or “Dear Computer....” The other half of the class pretends they *are* their AlphaSmart Pro s, and they spend the same amount of time writing about what *that's* like, using a first-person narrative to describe something like “a day in my life as a keyboard.”

Have volunteers from each half read their pieces out loud, going from one “voice” (human or computer) to the other. Try to establish a kind of conversational rhythm between the readings.

You need to listen carefully to pick up on topics for fur-

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ther discussion, e.g., how to improve the lives of the keyboards, how the the students are thinking and feeling about writing and computers, etc.

### **Expert Opinion**

One good source of expertise is, of course, the students in your class. Have them keep a running account in one of their files of the tricks they develop to help their work with the AlphaSmart Pro go faster and better. Have them share these ideas in class, collect them, and publish them in a student anthology for use in later classes.

### **Your Notes:**

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**Your Notes:**

**Your Notes:**

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**Your Notes:**

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## ■ ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephen Marcus, Ph.D., coordinates the National Writing Project Technology Network as well as the California Writing Project/California Technology Project Alliance. He is Chair of the Committee on Future Technology for the International Society for Technology in Education and is a member of the Committee on Information Literacy and the Assembly on Computers and English for the National Council of Teachers of English. He is on the faculty of the Graduate School of Education at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where he is co-director of SCWriP, an affiliate of the National Writing Project.



